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“THE ODD WOMEN” AND “THE GIRLS”

BY MARGARET PINCKNEY ALLEN

TWENTY-FIVE years ago, George Gissing found material for one of his sombre, reflective novels in the spectacle of the unmarried women of his time. “Odd women” he called them; and faced with stern reality the problem they constituted in the social order. Other novelists of that late Victorian day of course denied the existence of the tribe. Their stories were still concerned with the female who caught a man and therefore ceased to be odd. An occasional spinster aunt might fill in a corner of the picture, to be taken when needed, as a corrective to the studied sweetness of the love-making of the time. She sat there, wistful and unfulfilled, an effective foil to the triumphant, man-protected heroine. And always dependent on the bounty of others.

We accept, even now in this rebellious day, strangling conditions under which we live, as if they were inflexible, unchangeable. Such was the attitude toward women’s industrial and political relations. Up to a later date than one cares to mention these vital matters were not subjects for polite conversation or entertaining literature. Woman’s chief importance was as an emotional stimulus, or quietus, as the case might be. But George Gissing, being troubled about many things, found time to be troubled about this also, and *The Odd Women* was the result.

At the time of its issue I was not reading such novels. Something like Louisa Alcott and Tennyson was gradually driving out the doll-complex, and so I have no means of judging whether his courageous handling of the problem aroused any interest. Probably not. The only “problem” which even now really carries a play or a novel is an erotic problem. Yet this old copy is well-worn and much-repaired.

It reads with an air of unreality today. Is there anywhere a Dr. Madden who could bring six daughters into the world with no provision for their future, yet feel all the while that “the thought

of his girls having to work for money was so utterly repulsive to him that he could never seriously dwell upon it. A vague piety supported his courage. Providence would not deal harshly with him and his dear ones"? Of course Providence in those days, just as in these, had no time to deal gently with everyone, and equally of course, when the sturdy oak, Dr. Madden, is felled by an accident, the clinging Madden daughters in their various ways become practically a charge upon society. There are other ways of becoming a charge upon society than by merely occupying space in an eleemosynary institution. Monica Madden escapes into marriage. It was considered an escape in those simpler days.

Well, *nous avons changé tout cela*. One can sigh with relief and amusement at such old-fashioned attitudes toward life. Does Gissing, who pleaded with such half-hearted boldness for woman's right to some sort of adequate preparation for her industrial, social, psychic relationships in the world, know now what steps have been taken along the way? Women have gained the suffrage. There is no longer any question, in any stratum of society, of their right to enter industry in practically any form they choose. Even "ladies", not driven by economic necessity, take a "job" and continue their work through all the vicissitudes of marriage and motherhood. Marriage is assuming a more or less tentative character, and even in its most rigorous form is mitigated by great concessions to individuality. And when a novel is written on the subject of single women it is called *The Girls* instead of *The Odd Women*. In that title is a quarter of a century's social history.

If he could have looked forward twenty-five or more years, Gissing would naturally have expected that the social order of 1921 would have arrived at some understanding of such an ever-recurrent problem. How it would surprise him to read Edna Ferber's *The Girls*! Fortunately it would entertain him, too, and that is pleasant to think of, for Gissing took no phase of life lightly, and to worry about women in the abstract was almost more disintegrating than to worry about them in the concrete.

The tragedy of *The Odd Women* haunted me vaguely for many years. It seemed so numbing, so futile, so inescapable. In *The Girls* their tragedy is no longer futile, it is no longer dull, for the modern spirit takes most of its experiences, its minor joys and its

major woes, with a sort of mocking insouciance which is charming as well as psychically healthful. But are the problems escapable?

Well, the conditions that made the tragedy of Aunt Charlotte's fruitless life have probably disappeared forever. Girls are not considered unfit for sober marriage because of a sudden display of emotion over a lover socially impossible, nor do parents clap on metaphorical strait-jackets for life as a punishment for such conduct. Society to some extent still expects the unmarried daughter to render herself “a ready and acceptable sacrifice” to the home. Lottie, Aunt Charlotte's niece, thirty-five at the outbreak of the war, who had helped her mother keep house for so many fruitless years, doing errands which efficient organization of the mechanics of living would have rendered unnecessary, is still a familiar figure. Lottie's way of escape, via the war, from her aunt's desiccated futility, is as yet “simply not done”, as the English say. In her case, the vast storm of war obliterated the traces of what is still considered unsocial conduct, and saved her from the great price the world still exacts for such individual freedom. The war, however, makes this a case of “special pleading”, and so Lottie's answer is no solution. We can not have world wars just to cover up lapses from the social code.

And then there is Charley, the third generation of the modern odd woman. It is Charley who really reveals the full force of this problem. It is actually inescapable, not one of those comparatively happy difficulties which time and the slow accretions of social commonsense will finally obliterate. For Charley has as a matter of course advantages which would have seemed millennial to the Madden girls. She has business training and takes a “job” despite her comfortable circumstances, with the full coöperation of both parents. She has their cheerful consent to her love for a youthful poet thoroughly unfit from the Madden point of view, since he is the son of a delicatessen storekeeper. And all the love-making of these two children of their time is marked by a sane, frank, wholesome freedom which is like the wind over heather on a sunny day. What a contrast here to the fetid formality, the ancient male jealousies and egotisms, of poor Monica Madden's courtship. The inconceivable propriety of demeanor of her and her sisters! It was the fruit, no doubt, of that charming inclina-

tion to believe the worst, that deep suspicion of human nature which characterized the Early, Mid, and even Late Victorian. Other epochs, to be sure, have not been free from it, as witness the delightful rule of evidence, which assumes that if two people are left alone together, they just naturally sin.

But Charley loses her lover, even as Lottie. That of course changes the direction of her life for a while at least, though it does not blight it utterly as it would once, and the book stops before any further development of her destiny. There is no fear for her, however, as for the female adrift in other days. Courage, truth, and training are sufficient weapons in any battle.

The inescapable, irreducible minimum of the question, then, might be summed up in this. No advantages of training or progress can alter the fact that an odd woman of any era is first of all and after all only a human being. Poor gloomy Gissing evidently felt that she could be neatly ticketed, her special problems carefully catalogued, and then economic training with its independence of matrimony would solve all her troubles. But woman is an economic unit, not merely a marriageable female specimen. Lack of training for the odd women made them a burden on society and intensified their unhappiness. Yet sufficient preparation for life for the girls does not of itself assure them economic stability and happiness. All over the world there is a lack of jobs for self-dependent women. Jobs and husbands are both uncertain, and the longed-for political enfranchisement has shrunk from a panacea to a mere political right. It is easy to blame the war, but it is time to cease regarding wars as if they were great natural destructive forces like tornadoes and lightning. They are as preventable as any other plague. There is a larger problem here. What is the use of training anyone, man or woman, unless there is some intelligent, scientific grappling with the causes of unemployment?

Meanwhile it is to be hoped that the woman who might have written *The Odd Men* and didn't will be followed by some man who will write *The Boys*.

MARGARET PINCKNEY ALLEN.